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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 OTTAWA 001922

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [CA](#) [AF](#) [PK](#)
SUBJECT: CANADA: MAKING THE CASE FOR THE AFGHAN MISSION

REF: A. OTTAWA 1903
[1](#)B. OTTAWA 1769

Classified By: DCM Terry Breese, reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary. The Canadian body politic is highly conflicted over the Afghan mission, with one poll in September indicating that 68 pct of Canadians want a complete pullout in February 2009 and 56 pct want the troops out even earlier, while an October poll shows that 54 pct want Canadian troops in Afghanistan beyond 2009. The Harper government upped the political ante in the October 16 Throne Speech (septel) by positing 2011 rather than 2009 as a likely end to a Canadian military role in Afghanistan, so debate over the Afghan mission will continue to be lively. Public volatility over Afghanistan stems from the barrage of images that hit Canadians daily from the field, some positive and some negative. Prime Minister Harper, Defense Minister MacKay, and Foreign Minister Bernier are all speaking out more vigorously about the importance of Canada's role in Afghanistan and the need to ensure security in order to promote human rights, democracy, health, education, and development. The October 12 appointment of a new non-partisan panel of "wise men" to review and recommend policy options on the future of Canada's role in Afghanistan (ref a) should also help to provide better political coverage and possibly to come up with more popularly acceptable policy choices. End Summary.

VOLATILE PUBLIC SUPPORT

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Harper government is facing a general drop in public support for a military mission in Afghanistan, although the numbers fluctuate dramatically based on the wording of the questions. When Canada first entered Afghanistan in January 2002, 66 pct of the public supported the mission. This approval had declined to 54 pct in March 2006 and by July 2007 hit only 43 pct. In a September Ipsos-Reid poll, 68 pct of Canadians wanted Canada to pull out altogether when the mission ends in February 2009, while 56 pct wanted a pullout even earlier. A recent self-selected Globe and Mail internet survey put the figure even higher, with 85 pct saying Canada should not extend the mission. However, an October Ipsos-Reid poll indicated that 54 pct of Canadians want their troops to continue in Afghanistan beyond

February 2009, although most (four in ten) want the government to change the mission from combat to something else.

13. (SBU) On the political front, the government's "Speech from the Throne" at the October 16 opening of the new session of Parliament specified that 2011 rather than 2009 was now the government's target to end the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan and turn over security to the Afghan army and police, while promising another Parliamentary vote on the issue. Prime Minister Harper had already made clear that the nature of that mission may change based on recommendations by the new non-partisan panel of "wise men" headed by former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister John Manley, which will make its report in January 2008. The QLiberal reaction to the 2011 date is not yet clear, but one senior party leader has suggested publicly that the Party was not opposed to a continuing role for the Canadian military after February 2009 so much as it opposed a combat role in Kandahar after that date. The Liberals are also divided among themselves, with some recognizing that the original decision to go into Afghanistan came from the then-Liberal government, while others have claimed that the Canadian military "duped" the political leadership into this choice. The separatist Bloc Quebecois definitely intend to make the Parliamentary decision on a February 2009 pull-out a vote of confidence (and to vote against the government on it), while the leftist New Democratic Party (NDP) wants the troops out now (suggesting that they should be sent to the more "Canada-appropriate" mission in Darfur instead).

14. (U) The government's determination to stay on is a significant turnaround from where Canada appeared to be

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headed over the summer. In July, La Presse columnist Andre Pratte, a supporter of the mission, wrote in an op-ed entitled "Mission Finished" that "the Harper government has abandoned any idea of extending beyond February 2009." He lamented that this would relegate Canada to a "new international role: back seat driver." Columnist Don Martin in September 2007 similarly wrote of Harper "seeking a retreat with honour from the Kandahar battlefield." Even supporters of the mission such as retired Chief of the Defense Staff General Paul Manson have written of seeking ways to contribute to the Afghan mission that did not include a combat force in Kandahar.

MEASURING THE PROS AND CONS

15. (SBU) The volatility in public opinion appears to stem from the positive and negative images that emerge from Afghanistan daily. Many Canadians are aware of some of the good news stories coming out of Afghanistan these days: school attendance (especially for girls) is up, refugees have returned in the millions, medical care is better and more available, GDP has doubled, and infant mortality has dropped by a quarter, all against the haunting specter of a strengthening Taliban. They are proud that Canada is a part of these successes. There also appears to be a growing understanding in many circles that these types of missions are messy by nature and require patience, and an acceptance among many Canadians that robust security is necessary to implement the humanitarian and development assistance that Afghanistan so desperately needs. There is also a pride about Canada taking on a robust role in Afghanistan, consistent with the theme that "Canada is back" on the world stage.

16. (SBU) But the negatives are hitting hard. The biggest and most persistent negatives are recurrent casualties (71 military and one diplomat to date), each of which hits Canadians three times - when the death occurs, when the body returns, and when the funeral takes place. Some commentators have claimed that at one point it was statistically more

dangerous to be a Canadian soldier in Kandahar than an American soldier in Iraq. Many Canadians, wedded to popular mythology, have expressed the notion that the current Afghan mission is simply "un-Canadian" and gets away from the classic Canadian mission of post-conflict peacekeeping. However, some writers such as Esprit de Corps editor Scott Taylor are doing their part to remind Canadians that the myth of the friendly Canadian peacekeeper is just that -- a myth -- and have pointed to the fierce combat of the Medak Pocket in the Balkans: Afghanistan is not the first time Canadians have engaged in combat in the interest of peace.

17. (SBU) There is also a sense among many that Canada's share of the burden is too high, and that there would be nothing dishonorable about pressing other NATO allies to step up to the plate, with the contrary fear that if the Canadians appeared too willing to stay on, the NATO "slackers" would happily allow them to do so. Images of corruption and Qhappily allow them to do so. Images of corruption and disorganization in the warlord-heavy Karzai government, with parallel increasing poppy production, are also leading many Canadians to question both the long-term viability of the project and whether it is possible to mark progress. There is skepticism about eventual "success," whether by 2009, 2011, or any foreseeable date.

18. (C/NF) According to one of PM Harper's key advisors on Afghanistan, Keith Fountain (protect), the mission likely has been too focused all along on combat operations over development assistance; this will need to shift as Afghan's weariness with the presence of foreign military forces increases. Fountain has advocated internally more urgent delivery of humanitarian and development assistance, which would build good will and squeeze the Taliban's popular support and in the process bolster security. He nonetheless emphasized that such a shift is not the same as a withdrawal; he -- and his Prime Minister -- want to ensure that the option of a robust combat presence in support of development is on the table post-February 2009.

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MAKING THE CASE

19. (C/NF) PM Harper is actively fighting to make a case for continued Canadian involvement in Afghanistan. As noted military historian J.L. Granatstein had commented earlier, Harper "needs to mount a major political and media campaign on the reasons for Canada's presence and role in Afghanistan ... now" in order to keep the mission alive. In addition to the Throne Speech delineation of the importance of the Afghan mission -- both in humanitarian and security terms -- until 2011, PM Harper used a recent press conference to explain the need for a combat role for Canadian soldiers in Kandahar in support of humanitarian assistance, development, and security force training. Positioning the government better to explain the Afghan mission was apparently the main rationale for the August cabinet shuffle that replaced the inarticulate and "take it or leave it" Defense Minister O'Connor with the softer touch of then-Foreign Minister Peter MacKay, while moving francophone Maxime Bernier to Foreign Affairs, in part to better sell the mission in Quebec.

110. (SBU) Early in his tenure at DFAIT, Bernier represented the government at a prominent Montreal conference on "Canada Faces the Challenge of Afghanistan." As he had foretold to Ambassador on September 19 (ref b), he publicly reiterated Canada's desire to play a constructive role in Afghanistan even after February 2009, and made a strong case that Canada's mission there was important in the overall context of promoting human rights and democracy. To do so, however, Canada had to help create conditions of better security. Despite constant and well-planned heckling, Bernier made his points articulately and sometimes with passion. In response to a question from the Bloc Quebecois foreign affairs critic

on whether Canada will be militarily in Kandahar, Bernier commented "we will adapt and we will decide." Other speakers -- including the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General in Kabul, Canadian diplomat Chris

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Alexander, the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team leader Michael de Salaberry, Afghan Ambassador to Canada Omar Samad, and analyst Barnett Rubin -- underscored that the situation is improving and agreed that security was a necessary precondition to reconstruction and development.

¶11. (C) Comment: What the Canadian contribution in Afghanistan will look like after February 2009 will depend on a number of factors -- whether/when there is an election in Canada and who wins, progress on the ground, recommendations of the "wise men" panel, and whether casualties stay at an "acceptable" level. What is clear, however, is that the current government sees this mission as the right thing for Canada and would like to continue beyond the planned end-date. PM Harper appears ready to take a considerable political risk to do so, and the Manley Commission should help buy him some political space as he maneuvers through the minefields ahead.

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